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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ACCRA 002307

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SUBJECT: GHANA'S 2004 ELECTION: THE VOLATILE NORTHERN REGION

Classified By: PolChief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.5 d and e.

1. (C) Summary: The Northern Region of Ghana has a long history of conflict revolving primarily around ethnic, chieftaincy, and land disputes. In this pre-election period, intense party rivalries, tensions between claimants to the Dagomba tribal throne, and an apparent abundance of arms further poison the atmosphere, especially in Tamale and Yendi District. Incidents of violence can flare up at any time over the most trivial of issues. Nonetheless, there are some positive signs, and officials and civil society activists have begun peace-building efforts. The Electoral Commission appears to be effective and well-regarded. Regional authorities are bolstering security for the election and there has been no election-related violence in the north in the past month. If security is adequately tight and the parties act responsibly, the Northern Region has a good chance of having peaceful elections. The National Democratic Convention (NDC) is expected to do well in the northern region, especially in Tamale, in part because many perceive the rival NPP as ineffective in investigating, and possibly complicit in, the 2002 murder of the Ya Na (Andani chief) and 40 supporters. In the coming weeks before December 7, we will closely monitor the Northern Region, especially the Tamale Municipal Assembly and Yendi District. End summary.

2. (U) In a November 8-10 visit to Tamale and Yendi in Ghana's Northern region, PolChief and Pol FSN met with officials, civil society members, and party representatives to assess the atmosphere in Ghana's most volatile region prior to the December 7 presidential and parliamentary elections.

A Fragile Peace

3. (C) Northern region has been peaceful since October, 2004 and was quiet during PolChief's visit. A two-year state of emergency in the region was lifted in August, 2004. However, all of our interlocutors described the current situation in Tamale Municipal Assembly and Yendi District as highly volatile, capable of sparking into violence at any time with little provocation. (Note: The rest of the region is not particularly volatile. End note.) Northern Regional Police Commander Ephraim Brakatua opined that the "fragile peace" in Tamale and Yendi could break down any moment, highlighting chieftaincy and party tensions. He largely attributed the prevailing peace to a government decision to ban public political rallies, following the October death of a 14-year-old boy in a shooting in Tamale (see below). The District Chief Executive of Yendi and the Director of the Northern region Electoral Commission are concerned about clashes around (especially on) election day, but were confident that security measures would be adequate to prevent problems.

The Roots of Tension

4. (C) Our contacts highlighted the following main factors contributing to the current state of pre-election tension in Tamale and Yendi:

A Long History of Conflict: The Northern region has a centuries-old, complex history of ethnic conflict, mixing historical grievances with poverty, and disputes over chieftaincy and land. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Dagomba and other tribes with chiefs enslaved and extorted the more numerous Konkomba and other chiefless tribes in the north. British colonial rulers favored and used the Dagombas to undermine the chiefless tribes. After Independence, Ghanaian leaders continued to support chiefly groups in their land and other claims over leaderless groups, further exacerbating ethnic friction in the north. Since 1980 there have been 17 ethnic-based conflicts in the Northern region, including the 1994 "Guinea Fowl War" between the chiefly Dagombas/Nanumbas/Gonjas tribes and the Konkombas, which left an estimated 20,000 dead.

The Murder of the Ya Na: The tensions have taken a new dimension in recent years, with intra-Dagomba conflict between Abudu and Andani "gates" (descendant lines), following the 2002 murder of the Andani gate supreme chief,

the Ya Na, and 40 others, in Yendi. The brutality of this killing (the Ya Na was dismembered), failure to arrest anyone in this case and broad suspicions (although no reported evidence) of government complicity make this unresolved case immensely polarizing in the Northern region. The regional Chairman of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) admitted that this one issue made the NPP campaign in Northern region difficult.

Party Rivalries: All parties seek to manipulate ethnic tensions for political gain. It was clear in meetings with NPP, National Democratic Congress (NDC), and Convention People's Party (CPP) leaders in Tamale and Yendi that they intensely dislike and distrust each other. Abudus side with the NPP (Ghana's Vice President, with the NPP, is Abudu); Andanis clearly side with the NDC (NDC vice presidential candidate Mumuni is Andani). The parties clashed in Tamale in April. In Yendi on October 2, verbal taunting between NPP and NDC supporters led to the destruction of several stores.

Distrust of Government Authority: The NDC is convinced the police are biased toward the NPP and are being directed from Accra to look the other way on cases involving NPP supporters. The NDC is outraged by the Minister of Interior's recent statement that, if conditions are too tense for elections in the northern region, "Ghana can move on without Dagbon." The NPP Chairman told us bluntly "the security forces are not doing a good job", claiming they detain many innocent people and fail to stop incidents of violence. Perceptions of impunity in the Ya Na killing (including alleged complicity by the Yendi District Chief Executive), and the government's imposed ban on party rallies have also undermined faith in government authorities and exacerbated insecurity in the region. Both the NDC and NPP see Tamale as tense and unsafe, and agree that the rule of law had broken down in parts of the city. The Police Commander of Yendi confided that, because he had made enemies in Accra, he felt he was sent to Yendi to get shot.

Abundant Arms: Most of our contacts agreed the Northern region is awash in guns. Many are home-made guns and small arms, although there are also reportedly some automatic weapons. When asked about this, police in the region said they have heard about large arms stashes but have so far been unable to find many weapons. (Police Commander said he had uncovered only 18 illegal weapons since September). The availability of arms has contributed to recent tensions. On September 16, a business dispute at the Tamale abattoir led to a gun fight between butchers, with three injuries. On October 9, a 14-year old boy, who was wearing an NDC campaign cap (and returning from an NDC rally), was killed by a bullet reportedly fired by a guard at the house of an NPP activist. (According to our sources, the NPP activist was a builder whose house had been torched and vandalized in the past. All of our contacts believed the boy was hit by a stray bullet from guards seeking to protect the building, probably without a political motive). The police found weapons in the house, including an AK-47. Both the NDC and NPP admitted to us that they had groups of armed youths standing by to "defend" their party interests.

Lifting the Ban on Rallies, Phone-Ins: On November 12, the Northern Region Security Council lifted a ban on the transmission by Tamale radio stations of political discussions and phone-in programs. The ban was imposed as a security precaution following the October killing of the 14-year-old. On November 17, the Council also lifted its ban on outdoor political activities, imposed for the same reason. According to press accounts, the parties pledged to keep the peace, while the Council prohibited firearms at political rallies and limited rallies to no later than 5 pm. It is not clear whether the Council's decision to lift the bans will improve the security environment. While many in civil society opposed the bans because they were undemocratic and told us they were urging them to be lifted, officials and party activists were very cautious about a possible lifting of the ban on public rallies. The Police Commander said the ban on rallies had helped keep the peace and was unsure whether lifting the ban would lead to new flare-ups. Several contacts thought there was no need to lift the ban because rallies were ineffective in northern region, given the polarized tribal nature of voting. NDC contacts believe the NPP wants to lift the ban to enable Vice President Mahama to hold public rallies in northern region (NDC presidential candidate John Atta Mills was unable to do so in a recent visit to the area because of the ban). Both the NDC and NPP insisted that the ban was imposed on them by the Council but that, at this point, they would oppose lifting the ban for security reasons.

Some Positive Developments

15. (C) Against this backdrop of tension are some more positive signs.

Peace-building Efforts: The police, government and civil society are working to encourage peace among the region's rivaling communities. The Bishop of Yendi and NGO leaders are talking peace in meetings with Abudu and Andani youth and women. The District Commissioner and Police Commander of Yendi meets with youth groups, Muslim leaders, and the political parties to encourage community harmony. The Police Commander noted a UNDP-supported peace workshop in which youths, chiefs, and political and religious leaders pledged to resolve conflicts peacefully. The government formed a Northern Region Peace Advisory Council which, with UNDP support, is working to bring different stakeholders together. Youth groups in Tamale reportedly want to hold a peace rally in the coming weeks.

Expectations of Free, Fair Election: All of our contacts, including the rival parties, were convinced that the upcoming election will be free and fair in Northern region, and gave high marks to the region's Electoral Commission (EC). The regional EC Director told PolChief he had put in place all possible measures for free and fair elections (although some may try to cheat, he admitted) and the EC had "done everything possible" to register voters. He noted that around 95 percent of voters in the region had registered and that he hoped the EC would allow use of party poll books as a backup to the register on election day (all the parties told us they would support this as a means to ensure maximum possible enfranchisement).

Strong Security Presence: While recognizing that violence could spark at any time, most contacts on the trip were optimistic the election would be peaceful if there is a robust security presence in Tamale and Yendi. There has been no election-related violence in the past month, even after the decision to lift the ban on political rallies. The police also reassured us that election observers would be safe in the region. The regional Police Commander has a force of 648 policemen, augmented by 200 police on rotation from other regions of the country, and staff from the Customs, Prison and Fire services. He hopes for 300 more police reinforcements for the election. The District Chief Executive of Yendi told us he has one military company on hand (the military in the region remain in their barracks on election day unless needed for a security incident) and is also seeking police reinforcements. Both areas will deploy roving patrols of armed police.

NDC Likely to Do Well

16. (C) In the 2000 election, the NDC won 19 of 24 parliamentary seats (the NPP won 3, and the PNC party won 2 constituencies). In a 2001 by-election, the NPP gained an additional two seats. We expect the NDC to do at least as well in Northern Region this election. This year, the NDC will benefit from discontent with the NPP over the Ya Na's murder, and for the first time, the NDC running mate is from the north. The NDC is expected to do well in Tamale, while the NPP should do well in Yendi. The NPP told us it hopes to win 13-14 out of 26 total seats (there are two new constituencies in the region), pointing to its development performance and the advantages of incumbency. Nonetheless, they concede that because of the Ya Na murder, many CPP and PNC supporters will vote NDC. The NDC believes it will win 20 seats.

Comment

17. (C) On the surface, Tamale and Yendi feel like poor, sleepy towns. They are well-traveled by Embassy officers. The Ambassador had a successful visit to Tamale in September, launching a new "American Corner" library/computer center. PAS recently successfully programmed a basketball team in Tamale, USAID has been traveling to Tamale for election training, and the Peace Corps has 18 volunteers in Northern Region and a sub-office in Tamale -- all of which have been operating without incident. A number of international NGOs operate in Tamale, given the greater poverty levels in the north.

18. (C) If the security presence is strong and the political parties exercise restraint, the elections will probably go off in Northern region without violence. There was no violence in the region during the 2000 election. However, below the surface, there is significant anxiety in the north in this pre-election period. The parties talk in surprisingly dramatic fashion about possible violence. For example, the regional NPP Chairman mentioned rumors that Andanis would seek to "slaughter" NPP activists on the eve of the election. There is a great deal at stake for Abudus and Andanis in particular, especially given the Abudu/Andani divide of the NPP and NDC vice presidential candidates. Observers will be watching for several possible tripwires in the coming two weeks: will the lifting of the ban on public rallies lead to violence? Will Ghana's Vice President or

President visit the Northern region, as some expect? Will Andanis move to bury the Ya Na before the election, which some told us is possible? These could all further poison the atmosphere before the election. It does not take much to trigger violence in Tamale and Yendi and we will watch developments in the whole Northern Region closely during this potentially volatile election period.

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